

# Orality and Resistance in Agricultural Folksongs of Central Kerala

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## ABSTRACT

*Folksongs reflect the social, economic and cultural organization of the group which create them. These songs are handed down orally from generation to generation. Folksongs in general are expression of emotions that do not find an outlet in any other form either due to social restriction or due to personal inhibition. They articulate discontent with issues such as casteism, sexism, economic exploitation and so on.*

*As the Kerala society was primarily agricultural, the peasant folks, the Pulayar and Parayar, were tied to agricultural work and their lives were tuned to the rhythms of the agricultural occupation. My paper aims to analyse some of the agricultural folksongs of Central Kerala as reflection of the social and political milieu. As literature of dissent these songs voice protest against the issue of temple-entry and question the practice of barring the lower castes from entering the temple, restrictions on covering the upper parts of the body by lower caste women and other evils of the society*

**Keywords:** Orality, Resistance, Agricultural Folksongs

Folksongs in general are expression of emotions that do not find an outlet in any other form either due to social restriction or due to personal inhibition. Folksongs reflect the social, economic and cultural organization of the group which create them. These songs are handed down orally from generation to generation. They articulate discontent with issues such as casteism, sexism, economic exploitation and so on. There is a dire need to preserve these songs as they are in danger of becoming extinct with the shift from agriculture to industrialization and with the advent of cinema and modern forms of entertainment. As the Kerala society was primarily agricultural, the peasant folks, the *Pulayar* and *Parayar*, were tied to agricultural work and their lives were tuned to the rhythms of the agricultural occupation. My paper aims to analyse some of the agricultural folksongs of Central Kerala as reflection of the social and political milieu. As literature of dissent these songs voiced protest against the issue of temple-entry and question the practice of barring the lower castes from entering the temple, restrictions on covering the upper parts of the body by lower caste women and other evils of the society.

The agricultural labourers of Central Kerala are drawn from the *Pulayar* and *Parayar* castes – the backward communities in Kerala. However, these communities did not own the land they worked on. This was a privilege reserved for the upper castes: the *Nambootiris* and the *Nayars*. Thus, while agriculture brought the upper castes and the lower castes into close contact, it also preserved caste hierarchy. Power relations were played out while engaging in agricultural tasks and often these communities negotiated their relationship with each other through agricultural folksongs.

The primary source of my paper has been the songs collected from various agricultural workers, all women: both composers and performers. Most often the composer herself sings the songs, while a group of women, the performers, join her in the refrain. Sometimes, the lead-singer is paid an additional sum of money by the landlord as it ensures a higher efficiency in labour. Mariamma John, who has been conferred with the title of a Fellow by the Kerala Folklore Academy, Thangamma, a composer and performer, C.J.Kuttappan, folklorist and workers from the farms of Kottayam, Pathanamthitta, Ernakulam, Kuttanad and Alappuzha were the contributors of these songs.

The songs were recorded on audio and video either, while they were being sung by the women in the field, on request, or from professionals, who gave performances. Through these songs, the *Pulayar* and *Parayar* women give expression to their experience of struggle and toil. These songs are not merely a genre, but a way of life.

Nowadays, these songs are sung in professional performances rather than in agricultural fields. These songs which were sung and chanted down the centuries are also encountering a flail of opposition from trade unions:

Such songs, in olden days, made the workers work with more energy and enthusiasm. However, with the influence of the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU), this ancient art form in Kuttanad is now on the verge of extinction.

These songs are in danger of becoming extinct and along with them would be lost a vital, alternative paradigm for leading our lives in consonance with nature and voicing protests structures of exploitation.

Most of these songs were closely connected to land. Since the Kerala society was primarily agricultural, the peasant folks tended to be tied to agricultural work and were knitted to the agricultural situation. They evoked and reminded the specifics of their unsung pasts – their antiquity and their ancient, tranquil existence through these folksongs. These songs helped the singer to cope with the strenuous nature of their work. Central Kerala has various categories of agricultural folksongs.

In a society called upon to express its energies in the cultivation of field and fallow, these songs have become a pattern among the labouring folks who are oppressed, suppressed and repressed at every turn.

The following agricultural folksong recapitulates the social conditions and burning issues that come to the fore in these feudal times:

tannānē tānā tina

tannārām tānā ....

When the wind blows hot in the lunar time,

Fire was kindled beyond the walls.

And thampuran's spearmen,

Fended it off.

Thampuran's villains drew froth,

Staved it off with the wooden staff.

Thampuran's wrestlers,

Wrestled with the flame and fended it off.

Thampuran's swordsmen,

Staved it off with their sword.

Thampuran's firefighters,

Dampened it with water.

Thampuran's youth,

Stopped it with their verdancy. (C.J. Kuttappan 2001, Tiruvalla)

This is a two hundred-year-old agricultural folksong concealing a multitude of meanings. This is a highly metaphorical and allegorical theme that is passed on from generations to generations by folk singers. It typifies a state in which ardour and anger reign high in the hearts of the poor peasant as well as the powerful master. It connotes the madness associated with lunar periods and the uprising provoked in the heart of these peasant communities. It further shows how the master's spearmen, villains and staff bearers, wrestlers, swordsmen and youths stopped and staved off and quenched the flame kindled by the lower-class communities.

It also betokens on the other hand the uprising of the poor peasant folk and of how their uprising was quenched and doused; and of how the insurgents were ruthlessly put down. But minor revolts as these later led to the massive Peasant Revolt Movements. This song has travelled in a tide of sympathy among the valiant, vigorous band of the champions of the cause. It evokes a feeling of unity – personal and communal assertion on the part of the peasant folk. The lonely singers of the field are knit and bound in a larger bond of unity that cuts across narrow divisions and group loyalties. The motif of the song is a battle cry for the complete unanimity of the working people everywhere.

The song connotes certain smouldering passions which have gripped the poor peasant folks in a bid to overthrow the chains and trammels of their slavish past. It also shows how the masters had armed themselves to put down the people revolving against serfdom and thralldom. The hearts have hardened in both the powerful master and the helpless peasants.

The inflamed passions rising like the flames of fire denote remotely, insidiously and insensibly, a red revolution among the subjugated people and communities. And thus, it reeks of murderous and marauding intentions calculated to outwit the poor servile communities.

Apart from the social ills as caste-discrimination the abject conditions of the typical *Pulayar* and *Parayar* folks of Kerala under the reins of slavery are registered in the following folksong:

I am unable to do anything I drawled,

Please pardon me, *tambrānē* ,

Please pardon me.

With reverence I stand before you,

Plod on buffalo,

Are we not akin, buffalo?

Don't shake your head.

My head will break.

Father was sold in the market.  
 Mother was beaten to death in the field.  
 I have not cooked any gruel, don't sob,  
 I will tote up some water from the stream.  
 I will give it to you. (Thangamma, 2001, Kottayam.)

This is a thought-provoking and heart-stirring commentary on the anonymity in which the dumb animal and the mute peasants are placed. The woeful plight of the animal is juxtaposed with the obdurate degradation of the poor peasant. His is a state of abject dismay and he goes without even mouthful of gruel. A mere draught of water from the stream is all he and the animal could yearn for.

A past recalling not only of slavish conditions but also despicable aspects of slave trade is herein described. So, we have reason to believe that this agricultural folksong harks back to a period when slavery was licensed in the society and thus plunged the poor peasants to a state of wretchedness. According to Saradmoni, the state and position of these slaves were that they were not allowed to perish, i.e., to die of starvation. So long at least as they are able to work for their masters – and their so-called rights and privileges ended. On 7 April 1843, the Act for the Abolition of Slavery was passed. This Act “sounded the death-knell of a system which for many centuries was a prolific source of untold miseries for at least nine million of the inhabitants of the land”.

But in Travancore after much protest the first Antislavery Proclamation was passed on 14 October 1853. With changes in the first proclamation, the Maharaja of Travancore issued a fresh and second proclamation abolishing slavery on 24th June 1855 and declared the proclamation of 1853 null and void.

Though by 1855 slavery in Kerala was made illegal before a court of law, yet they were hedged with limitations. There was no demand from the slaves themselves for their emancipation. This is hardly surprising since they were illiterate, ignorant and steeped in poverty and had been moulded into submission for hundreds of years. On the other hand, there was not even an enlightened minority among the upper strata of Kerala society who sympathised with the condition of the slaves and voiced their cause.

The song ‘I drawled out, I am unable to do.’ has been rendered by Thangamma, an agricultural folk singer of Central Kerala who has taken considerable pain to preserve these songs nourishing and nurturing a dream of freedom and hope with interlocking continuity with a sinister past when the *Pulayar* and *Parayar* were traded as slaves. The song also constitutes and conceals elements of a mild protest enshrouded in the hearts of these poor peasants.

A woman labourer's life is brought into clear focus in the following folksong. The difficult circumstances of the neglected and socially downgraded *Pulayar* and *Parayar* are highlighted. This song captures the precariousness of the existence of the *Pulayar* and *Parayar* women roughly a century ago:

O God, listen.  
 To this groan of agony  
 Cut forest to walk, made hut to make it a house  
 After six days of its birth the mother  
 Lay the baby under the tree  
 With the ox and the buffalo  
 Which is tied together for land ploughing  
 On return when she sees  
 The baby has been worn to death by the red ants  
 O God Listen  
 To this groan of agony

(Padma, Vatsala, Ramani, Meenakshi, 2001, Kumarakom, Kottayam)

The toiling masses are painted here as lacking even a protective roof or wall for the just born child, who is bitten to death by ants for it was consigned to the shade of a spreading tree. This act of leaving the child to a natural berth under a tree shows the isolated situation of a mother, who has brought forth a child and, with little respite after delivery, is seen toiling under the hot sun, with the baby laid aside to rest under the shade of a tree. The lines “After six days of its birth the mother / Lay the baby under the tree” shows that the *Pulayar* and *Parayar* lived in an indissoluble bond with nature. The mother lays the baby under the protection of the tree – which is symbolic of security and warmth – just like a mother, who caresses her baby under her warmth. Thangamma, an agricultural folksong singer, also recalls this degraded situation, where she used to lay her children in the pits made in the field and work from dawn to dusk.

This song brings out the disjunction between appearance of economic independence and the reality of compromises and sacrifices made by a woman working on the land. While working on the land and contributing to the economic resource of the family seems to give women economic freedom, it also serves

to undermine other roles that they are expected to play. Nancy Folbre points out this paradox that women are confronted with (though she does this in the context of developmental processes), "...the same aspects of the development process that increase their economic independence as individuals increase their ...vulnerability as mothers".

There were times when the mother had to forego even feeding the baby as she would be reprimanded and denied adequate daily wages by the masters. The 'groan of agony' is evocative of various nuances of meaning such as a cry for protection, call for mercy, voice in protest the ruthless exploitation and perhaps also the groan of a mother seeing her child dead.

When we review themes of agricultural songs, composed by *Pulayar* and *Parayar* women, we are struck at once by what they reveal. The woman, as pictured in them, is a figure of resolute resistance against the oppressive society she lives in. She appears not only brave but also formidable in guarding her pride. Ironically, she is also characterized as being a dutiful servant to her master.

Incursions into the privacy and personal morality of the representative *Nili* girl is recorded in the following agricultural folksong as the burden of the song, which is also the burden of her life:

"*Nili* girl *nili* girl where are you going?"

"To reap the firstlings, *Kochambrane* "

"How thirsty I am due to the scorching sun."

"Give me some water that you had drawn from the well."

"The drawn water is not stored, young master."

"Receptacle and the rope have gone into the well."

"Give me a firebrand."

"Let me light my cigarette as a pass time."

"Even the firebrand has been extinguished, young master."

"Where has your father *Pulayan* gone?"

"To the hilly field to harvest young master."

The young master sought a rupee currency from his pocket.

Slowly, slowly he stretched the currency note

*Nili* girl being indignant thus said,

"The harvest sickle is in my hand, flee for your life"

(Mariamma John, 2002, Chenganacerry. Kottayam)

This song records the sexual exploitation of the *Pulayar* and *Parayar* women by men of the upper castes. The young master is engaged in an exchange of words with the *Nili* girl. She is described as the possessor of strong moral values and a high sense of honour.

*Nili* is accosted by the *Koccambran* as she wends her way to reap the first stalks of the harvest abundance. The *Koccambran* prepares for the exploitation of the situation to serve his ambition and evil design. He speaks of the scorching sun and how thirsty he is and solicits *Nili* to give him a pot of water. To this *Nili* says that there is insufficient water at home. Finding this situation unfavourable to him he perforce asks her to extend a fire to light his cigarette as a pastime; she replies that 'the lighted spark has also been extinguished'. 'Wither has gone your father?' asks the obtrusive *Koccambran*. She says that he has gone to harvest in the fields across. The young master waves some currency notes before her. Enraged by this overture, she speaks out rather vehemently thus, "In my hand is the harvest sickle, if you want your life get away from me."

A.S. Menon expresses that Parasurama "introduced the system (matriliny) and ordered that *shudra* women put off chastity and be ready to satisfy the desires of Brahmins". This unfortunate concubinage by *Nambootiri* men of the bondwomen, the *Pulayar* and *Parayar*, often times led to the marital isolation of the *Nambootiri* women. This practice, while not betokening any special sanctified relations, brought these peasant women to a sense of freedom comparable to what they normally enjoyed in their hearth and home, giving them their unquestionable equality of status, equality of opportunity and the feeling of economic advantage which were all endorsed.

According to a *Parayar* woman folksong composer and singer, Thangamma, living in Kottayam, Central Kerala, *Pulayar* and *Parayar* women in addition to working in the fields of their landlords also performed certain household chores such as washing the clothes and cleaning the vessels. Commenting on the grave injustice meted out to these women, Thangamma states that it was the custom that *Pulayar* and *Parayar* women have to submit immediately on her marriage to the landlord and spend the first few days with the landlord. Only then is she allowed to begin her connubial life with her husband. Sometimes

beautiful women married to *Pulayar* or *Parayar* were taken away by their landlords and kept as their mistresses.

As the paper has sought to demonstrate, agricultural folksongs have travelled in a tide of sympathetic tribute to the valiant, vigorous band of champions of the cause of freedom of self-expression. It was found that what finds voice as the uppermost sentiment in these songs was a wistful craving for a golden era of hope and fulfilment. They evoke a feeling of consanguinity and personal and communal assertion on the part of the peasant folk. The lonely singers of the field are knit and bound in the larger bond of unity that cuts across narrow divisions and group realities. Freedom is an irresistible urge; it is always z; more so, in our times.

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